



## Operational Planning At Platoon Level

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"Assemble the orders group!" While this command is far from unusual in the brigade or battalion tactical operations center, it is rarely heard as far down as platoon level. But why not?

Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Operations*, goes into great detail about the roles of the various brigade and battalion staff members and the importance of their interaction in the operational planning process. Each member of the staff contributes his knowledge and experience to the development of the operations order (OPORD) or a fragmentary order, and in doing so improves the plan while reducing the work load on the commander and the operations officer.

An experienced, well-integrated staff can rapidly put together a solid plan that takes into account each of the battlefield operating systems (BOSSs) and uses the capabilities of the command's subordinate units. This system of staff work and integration has been developed over time and is accepted throughout the Army—although refinements continue as the Army evolves and technology affects operations. The idea of a brigade or battalion commander developing a plan without consulting his staff and using their knowledge and experience is considered foolhardy at best and dangerous at worst.

Why are the maneuver platoons so different from a brigade or a battalion in

their planning process? To be sure, there are differences in organization, and the level of coordination and synchronization required at platoon level pales in comparison to that required at battalion level. But the impact NCO experience can have on planning at platoon level is not entirely different from the benefit derived from the knowledge and experience of the various staff officers on the planning process at battalion level.

Both FM 7-7J, *Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad (Bradley)*, and FM 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, address the familiar eight troop leading procedures (TLPs) in their Chapter 2 and give good examples of a platoon warning order and a platoon operations order. This chapter also addresses the value of rehearsals, the various types of rehearsals that may be conducted, and the relative merit of each type.

Both manuals (which many infantry leaders collectively call "the platoon leader's bible") note that the platoon leader will not often have enough time to go through each step of the TLPs in detail. Time, the only nonrenewable resource on the battlefield, always works against us.

The Ranger Course strongly reinforces the idea that time has a major effect on operations. Lack of time is one of the many factors that put so much stress on a Ranger student.

Missing a "hit time" or even a resupply link-up time, can lead to the dreaded NO-GO or another day of short rations. And, while time management is recognized as an important factor in the success or failure of a patrol leader, the course offers little formal instruction in time management or time-saving techniques. Most Ranger students pick up on some timesaving techniques during the course, but the squads and platoons rarely have the continuity to develop hard and fast procedures to codify and promulgate these techniques.

While the Ranger school platoon has little opportunity to establish planning SOPs because of the lack of continuity in personnel and duty positions, a TOE (tables of organization and equipment) infantry platoon can and should develop a planning SOP in order to produce plans and orders that draw on the knowledge of the NCOs of the platoon while reducing the time required to develop the OPORD. A platoon may develop a simple, well-rehearsed planning sequence and drill it until it becomes second nature. The first step is to develop the sequence and assign responsibility for the various tasks.

The first TLP, *Receive the mission*, may come in written form, face-to-face with the company or battalion commander, or by radio, and the platoon leader must immediately put together and *Issue a warning order* to his subor-

dinates. If the tactical situation permits, this should include the whole platoon, but in most cases, only the platoon sergeant and the squad leaders will be available. The warning order puts the platoon in motion, oriented on the upcoming mission and the preparation leading to it. While the squad leaders issue warning orders to their squads, the platoon sergeant begins logistical planning or coordination as required by the situation and mission. This time allows the platoon leader to delve into the order more deeply and pull out the specified and implied tasks, assets available, and constraints. Additionally, he must select the portion of the map that must be recreated on the sand table.

Once the squad leaders have had enough time to issue their warning orders, the third TLP, *Make a tentative plan*, begins. This is the step where the knowledge of the NCOs and the orchestration of the leaders and soldiers can lead to a solid, well-integrated plan in a minimum of time.

First, the platoon leader must instruct the NCO in charge of the sand table team on what he wants. The sand table team should be led by a senior team leader and should consist of the point men for the squads (and a gunner from each Bradley section, in a mechanized platoon). The platoon leader's instructions should include the area he wants portrayed, any control measures to be depicted, key terrain to emphasize, whether to build a separate terrain model for the objective area, and a deadline for having the terrain model completed. The platoon leader must remember that time is the driving factor for the amount of detail to be shown.

After giving his instructions to the terrain model team, the platoon leader assembles the platoon sergeant, squad leaders, and forward observer around the map to begin wargaming. He first recaps the highlights of the warning order and, using the map, graphically focuses everyone on the concept of the company operation and the platoon's mission. He then reads the specified and implied tasks to the assembled leaders so they will know the full scope of the platoon's responsibilities. At this point, the squad leaders and platoon

sergeant offer their ideas on how to accomplish the mission. This may be an open exchange, with each having the opportunity to build on the ideas of the others. Or the platoon leader may task each leader to develop a course of action (COA) and have them reconvene a few minutes later to discuss the various COAs and compare them. Although a team that has worked together for a time may fare well with the open exchange option, the danger is "group think," or considering only one COA. The platoon leader must prevent this by steering the wargaming to other COAs as well.

Once the wargaming team has developed at least two courses of action, the platoon leader must decide on one,

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based on the input of his squad leaders and platoon sergeant. At this point, the team refines the plan, using the BOSS as a guideline. Although these systems are usually considered at battalion level or higher, the platoon leader may use them as a framework to ensure that the plan is integrated. For example, at platoon level, fire support may consist of planning fires along the route of march; and mobility, countermobility, and survivability may consist of determining an internal breaching plan for the final assault on the objective.

At the completion of the wargaming, the platoon leader should provide guidance to each subordinate responsible for preparing a portion of the order (including a deadline for having the paragraph ready for the platoon leader's review). Each platoon may develop its own ideas about who prepares which portion of the OPORD, but one suggested breakdown is the following:

**Platoon leader:** Paragraphs 2 and 3 (should be the same in every platoon).

**Platoon sergeant:** Paragraph 4.

**Senior squad leader:** Paragraph 1.

**Second senior squad leader:**

Movement annex (when trucks, planes, helicopters, boats are involved).

**Junior squad leader:** Escape and Evasion (E&E) Annex.

**Forward observer:** Fires paragraph and annex.

**Radiotelephone operator:** Paragraph 5.

Each leader should have an acetated copy of the platoon SOP OPORD format and prepare his portion of the order in accordance with this format. This ensures that all aspects of the order are covered. It also helps accelerate the process of issuing the order, because those receiving the order are simply filling in the blanks.

At the time specified in his guidance, the platoon leader should inspect the terrain model to see that it meets the requirements for the issuance of the order. After making any corrections to the terrain model, the platoon leader reviews the paragraphs of the order prepared by his subordinates and makes any necessary corrections. Once these steps have been completed, it is time for the order.

As many field manuals say, the platoon leader should strive for maximum attendance at his operations order. When the tactical situation permits, this should include his entire platoon. When this is not possible—and it usually will not be—those attending should at least include the platoon sergeant, squad leaders, senior team leaders, forward observer, radiotelephone operator, and medic. Because the platoon leader has already inspected the terrain model and reviewed each of the paragraphs prepared by his subordinates, he may allow the subordinate who prepared each portion of the order to brief his portion. The NCOIC of the terrain model team may orient everyone to the terrain model and explain the legend. Then the senior squad leader may brief the situation paragraph, followed by the platoon leader briefing the mission and execution paragraphs, and so on. The end result is a well-prepared, well-briefed order issued after a minimum of preparation time.

Many may argue that a platoon leader who uses this technique for planning operations is simply delegating his job

to his subordinates. But the platoon leader is responsible for everything the platoon does or fails to do, which includes operational planning. Using this technique is not a shirking of his responsibility but a better sharing of the knowledge available, which better prepares the subordinates to exercise initiative during the execution of the operation. Because the operation is ultimately the platoon leader's responsibility, he must make the final decision on key matters. For example, he must choose the COA to use and decide how much risk he is willing to assume during different phases of the operation.

The next argument against using this planning technique is that the platoon does not have enough time to do a full-blown operational planning session. Many times this will be true, but the technique may be a very rapid one, once all members of the orders preparation group are well trained. As with any Army task, training is the key to proficiency.

While cross-training is certainly beneficial for junior leaders, platoon members must first become highly proficient in their assigned tasks. For this, repetition works best. Whether in a garrison or field environment, the platoon leader should use every opportunity to train his orders preparation team, with each member playing his assigned role.

The first few times, the platoon leader should allow plenty of time for the preparation of the order to ensure that each subordinate can complete his task to standard. As each subordinate becomes proficient, the platoon leader should decrease the time allotted to complete each task. This will give his subordinates the opportunity to determine what portion of their tasks must be completed to successfully brief the order (much like a company commander planning training and prioritizing critical tasks, as there is never enough time to do everything). The end result will be an orders group that is well-

rehearsed and able to complete orders to varying degrees of detail, depending upon the time available.

As with a brigade or battalion staff with subject matter experts, a platoon leader should use the collective knowledge of his NCOs to plan operations.

While the technique presented here is only one of many that could accomplish this goal, it is one that my platoon field tested in various battalion and brigade field training exercises and during a JRTC rotation. Each time, we worked to improve our proficiency, and the results were impressive. With regular training, any infantry platoon can enjoy the same success.

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